

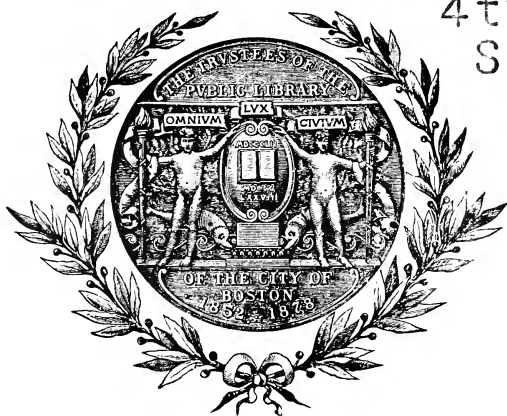


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THE THREE STAGES
OF
UNITARIAN THEOLOGY.

BY
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AMERICAN UNITARIAN ASSOCIATION,
BOSTON.

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“The object of the American Unitarian Association shall be to diffuse the knowledge and promote the interests of pure Christianity ; and all Unitarian Christians shall be invited to unite and co-operate with it for that purpose.” — ARTICLE I. *of the By-Laws of the American Unitarian Association.*

THE

THREE STAGES OF UNITARIAN THEOLOGY.

“DOUBTLESS thou art our Father, though Abraham be ignorant of us, and Israel acknowledge us not: thou, O Lord, art our Father, our Redeemer; thy name is from everlasting.” — ISAIAH lxiii. 16.

THE true prophetic heart, may we not say, breathes through these words, and gives them a music that can never die away. They are the tones of a spirit tender yet clear and strong; reverent in memory, open to love, warm with the humanities, yet driven from the sunny front of life, and in its retreat falling back on the sheltering loneliness of God. And do they speak for the Hebrew poet alone? Rather do they pitch the note of a perpetual hymn, caught up and delivered on, age after age, by the noblest voices of history. In the education of our race it is inevitable that the children should outgrow the father's house, and emigrate to new lands of thought; and could the men of old come back among us, and look at us with their patriarchal eyes, who knows but that we might ask their blessing in vain, and Abraham perchance would be ignorant of us, and Israel acknowledge us not? To hard and driving natures, content to start the world afresh with each generation, this may seem a mere sentimental grief. But the really progressive minds, that appear to run furthest from the past, are most conscious of their debt to it, most tinctured by its inner life, and most love its venerable names; and for them to be treated as outcasts from the family of the faithful, and find themselves exiles from

the communion to which they cling, is a lot more pathetic than stripes and bonds. A divine necessity, however, is laid on them to bear it. They cannot linger in semblances; they cannot tamper with words; they cannot look away from the light, and play it off in tricks of artificial refraction; they cannot breathe the air of half-truth and half-pretence which maintains the sluggish pulses of the world, but must pant aloft into the untainted elements of life. And as this thirst for the pure reality, this sensitiveness to the poison of falsehood, this inability to worship except in absolute simplicity of spirit, must needs take them apart from the level of human sympathy, and often leave the tenderest affections the most alone, what remains but that they fling themselves from the last brink of earthly reliance, and in a passion of infinite trust cast themselves upon the only True, and cry, "Thou, Lord, art our Father, our Redeemer; thy name is everlasting"?

No reformers have been more unconditionally thrown upon this sublime trust than those whose works we celebrate and prolong this day. As if to justify their own protest against the Trinitarian theology, and prove for them how it darkened human affections, they have been treated as aliens from the sacred commonwealth; and because they would not at Athanasius's bidding worship they knew not what, but abiding by the religion of Christ, would pray only as he prayed, and own no more than his two great commandments, and know no blessing but his beatitudes, they have been thrust outside the walls of the "City of God," and told that the fathers of the faithful are ignorant of them, and the Christian Israel acknowledges them not. Be it so. These chartered believers may shut up themselves, but cannot enclose our God. Without, as well as within, he lives; and as the gates close behind us, and we go into the open and solitary place, where the cathedral bells are lost, and the litanies

are heard no more, newer voices of his Spirit may perhaps float to us on the silence, and we may grow into larger apprehension by simply being alone with him. That there really has been a natural expansion and enrichment of Unitarian theology, favored by the very banishment into which it has been driven, will appear from a mere glance at the successive stages of its modern history.

Religion, even in its most intellectual forms, can never entirely lose its symbolical character; and the real interest of its doctrines will usually be found far behind the apparent. Had the question respecting the person of Christ concerned merely the composition of an historical individual, human or superhuman, it could never have stirred so intense a passion, and tracked its way through Christendom with such a line of storm. The secret of the strife lies deeper. He stands in it not for himself, but for mankind; and the doubt whether within that meek and suffering form the divine essence is hid truly means to those who shrink from it whether from us too any divine life is possible, and the Father of spirits will take up his abode with us. It is not the Jesus of the biographers, but the ideal of our spiritual humanity, the type and head of our race in its heavenly relations, whose seamless robe has been torn by the rude hands of controversy; and were it not that his problem and ours were bound up together, that his divineness was the assumed measure of our communion with God, and that what was asked about him was answered about us, the inquiry must have tired itself out in traversing the ages. But the mind returns with unexhausted wonder to the questions, "What are we?" "Where do we stand in the hierarchy of being?" "Do we belong only to Nature beneath us, or can we live in love with God above us?" and under the disguise of a *Christology* these *human* issues have ever been upon their trial, and to those whose ears are open have mingled with the

voices of angry disputants an undertone, not of softening piety alone, but of unsuspected sympathy.

The doctrine of the Trinity is an economy for linking together the human nature and the divine, — for snatching man, as an exception, from the general physiology of the world, where he would only, like the cattle, be a creature of the universal Maker; for recognizing his sonship and divine similitude as an eternal reality, whether known to himself or unknown, whether reserved in heaven or become historical on earth; and for bringing out his implicit consciousness of this in the whispered pleadings of a Spirit supreme above his own. God in the Universe, God in History, God in the personal Soul, — these three are separately recognized, yet blended into one, in the formula against which we protest; and in dissolving that formula we may be thought to hazard the balance of these relations, and to insulate ourselves on some hard and narrow unity. Our simpler conception, it is affirmed, is visibly inadequate both to the fulness of the divine perfection and the depth of human experience, and repels the richer and riper souls of Christendom by the Mahomedan baldness of its piety and the stoical evenness of its human ideal. Above all, we are assured, do we fail to provide the needful mediation between heaven and earth. The Christ of the creeds, being *both* God and man, can bring the two natures into harmony. The Christ of the Arians, being *neither* God nor man, is cut off from both, and cannot blend them in accord. The Christ of the Unitarians, being *wholly* man, carries in himself the alienated nature, and lies under the disqualification he is needed to remove. He may be an *example* upon the human level, but cannot, it is said, lift us to the divine. Without denying either all that is claimed for the Trinitarian scheme or all that is charged on our own, we shall find something to counter-vail the merits of the former and to repair the defects of

the latter in the growth of our theology during the last century.

The strength of the Unitarian faith lies in the very first position which it seized, and which I hold to be the impregnable centre of all true religious and moral theory, — that for all spiritual natures *Unity* and *Personality* are One. That which distinguishes you from another, and holds you to your identity from day to day, is the permanent Self-consciousness which the stream of varying thoughts touches as it flows, and the continuous Will which issues or permits the most opposite activities. These are the highest and characteristic attributes of our being; and by its highest attributes must every nature be measured, and in them must its essence be found. Suppose them to change. Let a fever obliterate your memory of the past, or establish within you a double and alternate consciousness, unrelated as your dreaming to your day; and we could no more call to account this fluctuating self than we could punish John for Peter's lie. The moral identity once broken, all other continuity goes for nothing, all other sameness is illusory. What boots it that you are still as tall, as strong, as swift as you were before; that your friends recognize your photograph and your voice; that your pulse has not altered its speed, nor your brain its size? Your being has fallen into fragments which these threads are ineffectual to blend. This rule of thought is our only guide when we pass to things divine; and it compels us to say that if God be not One *Person*, he is not One at all. Whatever else remains, when you have multiplied the *personal* centres of thought and will, is lower than these, and any unity it may have is of no interest to us, for whom *nothing impersonal can ever be Divine*. The Godhead, if by that you mean the Supreme Object of our worship and our trust, subsists not in any spiritual substance within whose compass separate per-

sonalities may have their presence and unfold their celestial drama, but in the living seats of Infinite Mind and Perfect Holiness. A plurality of these is a plurality of gods; and if you try to integrate them again by a common relation to some impersonal essence, you do but deify the lower after taking away the unity from the higher.

I know it will be said that the old creeds meant something less by the word "person" than it suggests to us, and intended only to mark three distinct parts which the divine nature plays relatively to the universe and to us. However true the explanation, it leaves the thing explained worse than it was before; for if the personal attributes, as we understand them, are absent from the members of the triad, where are they to be found? *Who* thinks the divine thoughts? *Who* wills the divine acts? Whither am I to fly for the Living Mind that answers to my own, Spirit to spirit? If these characteristics are disclaimed for the *personal* elements of the scheme, it is surely vain to seek them in the *non-personal*; and they must simply be without determinate place in it *anywhere*, and float unfixed in the spaces of the Divine Infinitude. And this is the simple truth: the language of the creeds is born of an ancient pantheistic philosophy, which blurred all the lines between Thinker and Thought, between God and the World, between Spontaneity and Will, and never gained the complete conception of *Personality*, human or divine. This great and prolific idea, approached but not secured by Judaism, is the healthy product of modern times, the chief gain of our speculative intellect, and inspirer of our practical life; and a religion which does not provide for it, which instead of borrowing anything from its light and power only blinks at them and eludes them, and escapes under cover of the Greek ambrosial cloud, half radiance, half mist, confesses itself unequal to the wants of living humanity. The first essential, then, of a restored purity

of worship was precisely the work to which our predecessors in the last century addressed themselves, — to clear the personality of God till it is simple as the unity of the soul ; to sweep away the haze of ancient pantheism, with the ecclesiastical mythology it holds ; to take the eternal Son of God from heaven, and isolate the Father as the one Infinite Mind, the sole self-subsisting Life, the all-pervading Will, at whose disposal creation lies.

The first effect of this absolute loneliness of God inevitably was to exhibit the universe as a stupendous centralized monarchy, administered on one plan, and directed by one power. The provinces of the cosmos can thus have, as it were, no municipal life, the local agents no real independence ; the whole hierarchy of place and rank is but the receptacle and organ of a force given and transmitted. There can be no pause for remonstrance, no idea of resistance ; the single impulse from the capital moves on its inexorable lines, and executes its errand at every station as it flies. Priestley's Necessarian type of doctrine was the natural result of his reduction of all causes to One, and his intense absorption in that One. When you plant yourself in thought at the divine station, and look out thence through the universal fields, and take the clew now of this law, now of that, to conduct you through the maze of phenomena, the whole system, reduced to a miniature at that height, must appear as one, with man as a minor organism swept along in its current of force ; its scientific programme will construct itself within your imagination, filling up its vacancies as the prospect clears, till the whole appears to you as a mighty machine of divine invention, the vehicle of predetermined methods, and the depository of predetermined ends. So long as the unity of the divine agency was in question, and was threatened with the partnership of co-equal powers, this religion of causation, which indignantly expelled all "fel-

low-workers" and all withstanders of the Most High, met the wants of the time, and fostered a sublime and comprehensive piety. You pass through an experience at once subduing and exalting when you part from all realities but the Supreme, and find yourself with him alone; when the throng of secondary causes ceases to distract and to conflict, and as it sinks into semblance drops into the lines of an eternal order; when you try to empty the running waters and the sweeping winds and the teeming earth of any forces of their own, and bid them speak and look for him alone; when the passions of men rise up against you, and you stand still and answer not, because they subside before your eye into a pulsation of his will; when the very thoughts you seem to think resolve themselves before you into phenomena of his life passing a conscious point of space; when, in short, life becomes to you a sacred dream, and history a soliloquy of God, and the possibility is gone of anything less than the Divine. As if to test at once the sustaining efficacy of this faith, its great apostle in the last century was driven, the victim of ruinous outrage, from the country he had instructed and adorned; and never did they receive more impressive comment than in the lofty patience, the serene trust, the unexhausted benevolence of the exile of Pennsylvania.

In vindicating the sovereignty of the universal Father, this scheme subordinates the whole universe alike, and allows nothing to approach nearer to him than the web to him that weaves it. The threads may be of this color or of that in the warp or in the woof; but all are interwoven in the same texture, and hold a homogeneous relation to the Maker. Man, therefore, is not less exclusively a part of Nature than the birds and the plants, is worked up in the same way into the organism of the world, and though he may have a larger consciousness, containing within itself more successive links in the chain of production,

is equally the theatre of their predetermined order, and powerless to give them an alternative direction. He too, like all else, is as the clay to the potter, to be moulded by another; and be the pressure on the inside or on the out, he is shaped, and does not shape himself. Since he is sensitive, and can be turned hither and thither by the touch of pleasure and of pain, he is *manageable*, and may be broken in; but since he cannot help going whither the given impulses take him, he is not *responsible*. The treatment of him may be *disciplinary*, but cannot be *moral*; you may pity him, but cannot blame him; and he may feel regret, but never compunction. If this is his aspect in the human view, still more must it be in the Divine. How can God, who meant him to be exactly what he is, call him to account, or look on him with less complacency than if he had been different? And so the moral sentiments which are superseded on earth disappear from heaven, and he whose name was once "Righteous" and "Holy" merges all his perfections in "benevolence." Nor does there seem room upon this scheme for any *personal* relations between us and God, whether of *similitude* or of *communion*. For that which constitutes him a *personal* being is precisely that free, originating power of which we have none, and which, centred all in his nature, leaves him the only *person* in the universe, and us but a complicated sort of *things*. In the only attribute which gives him *character*, we can never be like him; and we have no independent standing-place from which we may speak with him face to face, no private closet where we can enter and shut the door. If we kneel down, it is on his prompting-ground; if we sigh, it is his breathing; if we pray, the words move the wrong way, and flow from him, not to him. He possesses us behind and before; and turn and look and implore and weep as we may, it is still his own drama under masquerade. From this theory, it is plain,

the "eternal decrees" have not yet taken their departure. By the touch of benevolence they have lost, indeed, their *cruelty*, but not their *absoluteness*; and something else is needed ere we meet the presence of him to whom arose the night cry of Gethsemane.

The reaction naturally came from the other end of the relation between us and God. As in the *religion of causation* man seemed to be crushed into a mere creature, so was it on his behalf that remonstrance broke forth, and at the bidding of Channing the *religion of conscience* sprang to its feet. However fascinating the precision and simplicity of the Necessarian theory in its advance through the fields of physical and biological law, it meets with vehement resistance in its attempt to annex human nature, and put it under the same code with the tides and trees and reptiles. Our personality, though frightened and dwindled for a moment, and hardly believing its own voice, is sure to recover from the most ingenious philosophy, and to reassert its power over the alternatives before it, and own its obligation to the authority within it; and the second period of our theology is marked by this recovered sense of moral freedom. When the tones of the New England prophet reached us here, why did they so stir our hearts? They brought a new language; they burst into a forgotten chamber of the soul; they recalled natural faiths which had been explained away, and boldly appealed to feelings which had been struck down; they touched the springs of a sleeping enthusiasm, and carried us forward from the outer temple of devout science to the inner shrine of self-denying duty. The very inspiration of the new gospel, in what thought does it lie? *The greatness of human capacity*, not so much for intellectual training as for voluntary righteousness, for victory over temptation, for resemblance to God,—a greatness attested on the terrible side by the power to incur *guilt*, to choose

ruin, to resist the Supreme Will. The interval between our lowest possible sin and our highest possible holiness is infinite, and can be expressed by no physical contrast of hell and heaven ; and that interval measures the range of our power and the solemnity of our trust. Of this vast scale of possibility we have notice given to us in the aspirations and the remorse of conscience, — whence we well know that our sins are more than mistakes, and our self-conquests more than prudence ; that both are our own, and we are shaped into neither ; that by the one we sink into mere Nature, by the other we rise toward God. Thus regarded, moral distinctions, no longer resolved into mere sentient ones, are reinstated in their independent reality, and the apprehension of them becomes the supreme dignity of all minds. There is one and the same righteousness for the whole hierarchy of spiritual natures, and the free love of it and life in it is the bond of their glorious commonwealth. Here it is that man is truly “the *image* of God,” and not his moulded *creature* merely. In proportion as he attains goodness, purity, disinterested love, and strength to negative the wrong, does he really reflect the divine lineaments in little, and enter upon an actual sympathy with the Holiest of all ; and the essential perfection of the Parent Mind repeats itself in the child, and kindles his features with a lustre of the heavens. Under the light of this faith the history of mankind is no longer a mere branch of the physical development of the world, the last chapter in the natural history of species, but broadly distinguishes itself from these, and appears on a different stage as a drama of real probation, whose great criminals, tyrants, and impostors we are not bound to pity like the sufferers of loathsome disease in an infirmary, but may abhor and denounce as enemies rather than victims of God, and whose heroes and saints we may regard as something more than animated figures handsomely constituted

and finely tempered for their work, and visit with our natural praise and reverence as faithful representatives in time of the eternal justice and purity. If you gaze down upon the human race from the causal throne of the universe, they are flung into insignificance, and float as gleaming dust upon the air-current; but if from the interior of the human spirit you look up to the heaven of God, you find a possible divineness in man and an affinity with the Original Perfection which dissipates the illusion of his littleness. Will, then, this sense of moral freedom, of the reality and greatness of our trust, turn us into Stoics, and set us up in self-gratulation and pride? We are told that so it must be if we as free persons stand face to face with the personal unity of the Father who constitutes us his children, and that we can have no humility unless there be an eternal Son of God in heaven to graft that grace upon us as a portion of his own.¹ If we ask for a reason for this strange dictum, we are only told that it is impossible for a finite personality to be humble out of its own resources and reflections: the feeling must be divinely given. Who, then, is it that is said to make us partners in this lowly grace? The eternal and spotless Son of God! Is, then, humility possible in an Infinite Personality, in one who stands only in presence of equal or of lower beings, and in whom failure has never been and progress never can be, yet *not* possible to us in our finite strife and imperfection, who are forever haunted by the ideal which we do not reach, who see an indefinite hierarchy of excellence above us, and who in all our shortcomings have day by day to spread our moral record before the Holiest of all? Surely, if there be a position and a mind in this universe shut up within the tenderest shadows of humility, it is ours; and if it be true, as our critic affirms, that we

¹ Tracts for Priests and People, No. XIV., "The Incarnation," by Richard H. Hutton, A.M., pp. 27-30.

Unitarians feel not these shadows, but lift a self-righteous head, may God give us better knowledge where we stand!

If now we put together the two types of doctrine which I have described, and make them into one so far as they are compatible, shall we find rest in a complete and adequate theology? Let us say from the first that God is sole cause in the natural world, and from the second that he is sole cause except ourselves in the moral world, where we are permitted to be "fellow-workers" with him; is this a finished account of his relation to us? No. All this might be true; he might pervade all Nature with his presence and his providence; he might invest our spirit with a share of his free will; and might then withdraw from our voluntary life, and leave us to work out our moral problem alone, and only in the end return to take account of our fidelity. In this case each soul would be as a spiritual island planted out in the natural deep of things, beaten by the tides of law that sweep around, but with autocratic power to turn their destructive force aside, and make them serve its affluence and beauty. We should thus sustain real responsible relations to the heavenly Father, — relations which he has planted us out to assume, and which he will recall us to sum up; but meanwhile we shall remain personally apart, and live as sons in a foreign land, executing the sacred trust they have brought from home. Is, then, our spiritual nature thus rounded off into self-sufficient isolation; and is it across a chasm without a bridge that we look to him, and feel after him in vain to find him? When we too are on the eve of our cross-bearing, and take up the words, "I am not alone, for the Father is with me," is it only of a *physical presence* that we speak, and must we faint and struggle on through the silence of our God? Many a path of life such moral desolation would turn into a dolorous way; nor could

there well be a more pathetic lot than to believe in a Father of our spirits, and to think him out of reach. But what is to fasten upon us so miserable a dream? Is it the nightmare of law that sits upon our breast, and turns our cry for Him into a helpless shriek? We have but to open our eyes, and the ghost is gone, and we draw breath in the sweet morning light. Law reigns inflexibly through the natural life, and if that were all, would reign inflexibly everywhere. But there is in us that which is above the natural life, and apprehends what lies beyond it; and just as God is not imprisoned in the universe, but transcends it, and in that outlying realm is hindered by no pledge from acting freely out of fresh affections, so have we a range of free ideal life, whence we can look down upon the instincts of nature and up to the Infinite Holiness, and which we know is in subjection to nothing inflexible. This is precisely what we mean by *spirit*, — this liberty to move alternatively out of the thought and love of a reasonable mind. God is a spirit, in so far as he is not locked up in the invariable order of the world; and there is a spirit in man, in so far as he is not disposed of by his organism and his dwelling-place, but rises in thought and directs himself in affection to what is above them. Here, then, it is that there is room for true communion, that Spirit may meet spirit, and that the sacred silence may itself speak the exchange of love. Our moral ideals, the irrepressible sigh after higher perfection, the sense of divine authority in every vision of the better, the shame at every yielding to the worse, — these, we are well aware, are not of our making, or donations of other men. They are *above us*; they are *given to us*; they are what draw us to God, and commence our likeness to him. In this field of spiritual affection that lies around our will, the common essence of man and God, the divine element that spreads its margin into us, has its home, its life, its reciprocal

recognition, its bursts of human prayer, its answer of divine compassion, its deep shadows of contrition, and returning gleams of restoration. The life with God, then, of which saintly men in every age have testified, is no illusion of enthusiasm, but an ascent through simple surrender to the higher region of the soul, the very watch-tower whence there is the clearest and the largest view. The bridge is thus complete between the divine and the human personality ; and we crown the religion of *causation* and the religion of *conscience* by the religion of the *spirit*. If we, in our poverty of thought, have had to take them up successively, all of them together have the authority of him "in whom all fulness dwells," and can never be wanting in us except as we fail of "the full stature of Christ." We know with what meaning the lily of the field looked up into his eye ; and if the robe of beauty on the earth was to him no dead product of the seasonal machine, but woven by the living hand of God, he sanctioned the piety which resolved the creative agencies back into the Creator's. We know with what strong crying and tears he could expostulate with heaven, and wrestle, as it were will with will, in the hour of temptation and of agony, yet as a son learn obedience through that which he suffered, and end with the calm words, "Not my will, but Thine, be done ;" and alike in the strife and in the surrender we have his witness to the reality of that moral conflict in which sin is always possible, and filial self-sacrifice is the only victory. We know how he fed the secret springs of his gentle and holy life, and sought upon the hills and in the night for the loneliest confidences with the Hearer of Prayer, and with mingling confines of personality felt himself in the Father and the Father in him and his ; and we must own in him the supreme witness to the spiritual union of man with God, — a union which, were it constant as in him, might be deemed an incarnation, but where transient

and intermittent, as with our lower fidelity, appears rather as a dispensation of the Spirit.

Thus, then, the Unitarian protest, which perhaps begun with too great and monarchical a separation of our world from heaven, comes round at last to a reunion of the human and divine. And in the cycle which it has run there is a curious recovery, as it were, of the functions of Trinity without its paradoxes, only with the drama transferred from the individuality of Christ to the life of humanity. We have traversed, and at length united, the relations of *creature to the Creator*, of *Son to Father*, of *weak and tempted to the all-quickening Spirit*; and may we not say that thus, without confusing the nature of God, we have enriched and ennobled our religious comprehension of man, and provided for a more balanced justice to the claims of Nature, of conscience, and of the soul, and a blending consecration for them all? If an expanding faith brings us, as we think, an ampler peace, let it stir us also to a deeper fidelity; and if those who know us not still drive us from the sacred enclosure, and treat us as wanderers from the Christendom we love, all the more let us fling ourselves into the embrace of the Only True, and still say, "Doubtless thou art our Father, though Abraham be ignorant of us, and Israel acknowledge us not: thou, O Lord, art our Father, our Redeemer; thy name is from everlasting."

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